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SUBJECT: EU, OTHERS FRUSTRATED WITH IRAN HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUES

CLASSIFIED BY USEU POL MINCOUNS LEE LITZENBERGER, FOR REASONS
1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY EU, Swiss, and Australian participants took the lead at a Berne Process meeting on Iran on November 29 in Brussels, agreeing that Iran was stonewalling their bilateral human rights dialogues, but Norway was optimistic that its recent exchange might yield an invitation to Iran for further discussion on human rights issues. Suggested strategies for 2006 included continued Western public and government pressure on Tehran, responses such as joint and collective statements to human rights abuses, coordinated action in international organizations, and outreach to non-aligned countries to avoid no-action motions in the UN. All agreed that while sanctions were becoming a an increasingly realistic option, third country "spoilers" -- like China -- could derail Western efforts by stepping in with political and economic support. END SUMMARY

EU: Frustrated But Trying

¶2. (C) On November 29, the Swiss mission in Brussels hosted a dinner on the Berne Process on Iran. Participants included representatives from Australia, Finland, Norway, Canada, the U.S., and the EU -- including the current UK presidency, the incoming Austrian presidency, and EU Commission members. They discussed the state of their bilateral human rights dialogues with Iran and brainstormed next steps. The UK EU presidency representative, Alexandra Hall Hall, said the EU's human rights dialogue with Iran has been stalled for 18 months, but the EU was funding the UNDP and other international organizations that are engaging civil society in Iran.

¶3. (C) Hall said Ireland in June 2004 was the last EU presidency to hold a human rights dialogue with Iran. The next presidency-- the Netherlands --after reviewing the EU-Iran human rights dialogue, recommended that Brussels needed to register its displeasure with Tehran and identify concrete areas for progress. During Luxembourg's presidency in the first half of 2005, EU troika representatives visited Iran in April and pushed for a resumption of the dialogue; they received some impractical suggestions and a polished response designed to stonewall the EU. The UK presidency has since pushed for dates to meet with Iran, but to no avail.

¶4. (C) Nevertheless, Hall said a human rights dialogue was still valuable because it was a way to register concerns; it was worth pursuing if both sides were committed. Hall said the EU would not give Iran the satisfaction of saying that "it was the EU that walked away" and emphasized that direct aid contributions from Western countries should complement, not replace, human rights dialogues.

Switzerland: The Ball's in Iran's Court

¶5. (C) The Swiss representative, Guillaume Scheurer, said Switzerland's bilateral human rights dialogue with Iran, held in Berne in early June, took place in a "constructive atmosphere" but was short on substance. The Swiss focused on torture, freedom of expression, corporal punishment -- including juvenile execution -- political prisoners, judicial reform, and gender issues --including violence against women. Iran was not prepared to answer any of the questions raised, but only responded with condemnation of Switzerland's discrimination against Muslims. The dialogue included a visit to a center in Basel that focused on issues concerning violence against women, and concluded in "a positive spirit" of follow-up and exploring the potential for reform.

¶6. (C) Following the June dialogue, Switzerland established a position in the Swiss mission in Tehran focusing exclusively on human rights issues and projects with Iran's civil society. Switzerland also drafted a proposal for human rights cooperation with Iran's Ministry of Justice -- the key ministry for any substantive progress on human rights, according to the Swiss representative -- including projects on judicial reform and violence against women. Calling the Iranian response to these project proposals a "benchmark" for Iran's willingness to follow through, the Swiss representative said there has been no response from Tehran

since the proposal was delivered in early October.

Australia: Keeping a Foot in the Door

17. (C) Sarah Storey, the Australian representative, said Australia has only had one human rights dialogue with Iran, in December 2002. Since then, Canberra has fruitlessly been requesting follow-on meetings and has implemented a direct aid program -- mainly, funding for drug addiction rehabilitation -- to try to keep a foot in the door. Storey observed that the new regime in Iran does not appear likely to be easily influenced by the international community.

Norway: Potential for Progress

18. (C) Inger-Marie Bjønness, the Norwegian representative, said that Iranian Vice Foreign Minister Jalili attended the November 22 bilateral human rights dialogue in Norway and expressed concern about democracy and human rights issues in Iran. She said Jalili invited the Norwegian Foreign Ministry to visit Iran and suggested that should this happen, it would be an opportunity for coordinated effort.

Strategies for 2006: Demarches to Sanctions

19. (C) The representatives discussed various means to cooperate on Iran's human rights situation, such as publicizing demarches and increasing public pressure on Iran, which the Swiss and the UK both praised as having been effective in some juvenile execution cases. Other suggestions included support for Iranian civil society, human rights activists, and those university professors that have not yet been replaced with hardline ideologues. Canadian representative Catherine Boucher said that Ottawa supported continued UN pressure and obtaining permission for UN human rights officials to evaluate the situation in Iran on the basis of international regulations -- "a far better alternative to journalists."

10. (C) Richard Lee-Smith from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office suggested that the deterioration of the nuclear track might call further engagement into question, and suggested sanctions don't seem "so far away" as they might have two years ago. However, the Austrian representative pushed for an informed approach to further steps and cautioned against the threat of "third-country spoilers" -- like China -- that could derail Western efforts by stepping in with political and economic support.

11. (C) All agreed, however, on the need to "up the game" as Iran toughens its stance and consider initial, burden-sharing measures such as collective statements, joint or aligned demarches, coordinated action in the UN and other international organizations, and increasing outreach to developing countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America to thwart Iranian attempts to foster voting blocs to support Iranian-led no-action motions. Scheuer said Switzerland would be willing to use its human rights officer in Tehran as a coordinator for future efforts. There was general agreement hold another round of the Berne Process on Iran in February or March 2006.

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